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Free-swinging press keeps Saigon ducking

By Daniel Southerland
Special correspondent of
The Christian Science Monitor

SAIGON

Under its new press law, South Vietnam now has one of the freest presses in Southeast Asia, and the daily paper with the biggest circulation here happens to be sharply critical of President Thieu.

For the past several months, the newspaper Tin Sang (Morning News) has led the field not only on criticism of the government and in circulation figures but also in terms of the number of times it has been confiscated.

The paper theoretically is confiscated just about every other day on grounds such as "disseminating arguments detrimental to the national security" or "damaging to the fighting spirit of the armed forces."

But the government's confiscation procedures are ineffective. The police always seem to arrive too late to grab the papers, and the wily old women selling papers on the sidewalks in Saigon know when and where to hide those designated to be confiscated.

The confiscation orders cut down on the circulation of Tin Sang in the provinces, but most of the issues published for Saigon, where the paper has at least half its readers, usually reach the street regardless of the government's moves.

Verifiable circulation figures are hard to come by, but most sources say Tin Sang sells an average of at least 40,000 copies a day. Directors of the paper itself say its circulation is averaging around 60,000 a day.

But most important of all, since the new press law was promulgated nine months ago, the government has not been able to close down Tin Sang or any other newspaper among the more than 30 now being published in Saigon.

In the old days, the government could shut them down arbitrarily, and frequently did just that, since few of Saigon's papers show much support for the government.

Effect of new law

In 1968 and 1969, Tin Sang had to suspend publication eight times, for periods of two to six months. Under the new law, however, papers can be shut down only through a court decision, and the courts have yet to suspend a single paper.

All this does not mean the press is completely without its problems. Some journalists have complained of government intimidation even after the new press code was promulgated.

The government drafted one of Tin Sang's editors into the Army, for instance, when he had every right to be exempted. This was widely considered to be a move against the paper and its antigovernment position, names.

It is also true that some subjects are still considered taboo in the press and that the government would probably find ways of making life unbearable for any paper that advocated a coalition government.

But even the editors of Tin Sang, who rarely have anything favorable to say about the current situation in South Vietnam, admit that the Vietnamese press is freer now than it ever was, perhaps with the exception of the first few months after the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1953 when there were no controls at all.

Success formula

"Before, if we had reported the tiger-cage incident, or if we had written editorials advocating a cease-fire, we would have been closed down immediately," said Nguyen Huu An, secretary-general of Tin Sang. "Now they don't have the right to shut us down like that."

There appears to be a number of reasons for Tin Sang's success. First of all, the government's attempts to confiscate the paper actually enhance its appeal, according to many Vietnamese.

Tin Sang's youthful publisher, Ngo Cong Duc, a National Assembly deputy, says most of the paper's readers are attracted more than anything else by its political-gossip column, called "Duck News," which includes many of the latest rumors.

Tin Sang is anything but dull. Its style is racy — many say irresponsible. Like most Vietnamese newspapers, its headlines often promise much more than the articles below the headlines deliver. But Tin Sang also attracts readers with its daily, hard-hitting critiques of the Thieu government and U.S. policies in South Vietnam.

Appeal traced

"We appeal to readers who agree with our point of view," said Mr. Duc. "Our point of view is non-Communist, but it does not go along with the idea that we have to be subjects of the United States. The present government is too dependent on the United States."

A Roman Catholic, Mr. Duc is from a well-to-do South Vietnamese family and is related to the Archbishop of Saigon. But his views are far from conservative. He favors an immediate, unconditional cease-fire. He opposed the entry of South Vietnamese troops into Cambodia. He feels

the Vietnamization program is a "U.S. program suited to political conditions in the United States" but that it "doesn't bring peace any closer for the Vietnamese."

"With Vietnamization, the Vietnamese will keep on fighting each other," he said in an interview. "But that's not a solution to the war."

Compromise urged

In Mr. Duc's view, the Saigon government and the Viet Cong eventually must negotiate and reach a compromise solution to the war "because both the government and the National Liberation Front are realities that cannot be ignored."

He said the ideal candidate to oppose President Thieu in the presidential election scheduled for next year is retired General Duong Van Minh, former chief of state and hero of the 1953 coup against Ngo Dinh Diem. If General Minh decided to run, and the election were honest, he would win, said Mr. Duc.